

# Conceiving Parenthood: American Protestantism and the Spirit of Reproduction

reviewed by [Jean Bethke Elshtain](#) in the [November 17, 2009](#) issue

## In Review



## Conceiving Parenthood: American Protestantism and the Spirit of Reproduction

Amy Laura Hall

Eerdmans

Those familiar with Amy Laura Hall's work will recognize in *Conceiving Parenthood* her characteristic thoroughness, fairness, careful research and abiding concern for the history and contemporary realities of mainline American Protestantism—especially Methodism, her own tradition. The picture she paints is not a pretty one. It is painfully clear that in the area of parenthood, especially maternity and the family, liberal Protestants have tended to become cheerleaders of the Zeitgeist rather than “signs of contradiction” (in the words of Pope John Paul II).

Searching for rays of hope amid the general gloom, Hall evenhandedly tells historical tales of fanatical searches for domestic hygiene that were tied to moralizing crusades about cleanliness—all blessed by American Protestantism—with corollary efforts to manipulate the best time to have children and to transform motherhood into a scientific enterprise. Unsurprisingly, when it came time to take a stand on cleaning up the reproductive lottery, the Methodist mainline participated enthusiastically in the eugenics effort. Liberal Protestants today generally fail to take a determined stand against genetic manipulation—or “positive genetic enhancement,” in our cleaned-up lingo.

How did America's Protestant mainstream get caught up in the crusade to clean up motherhood and child-rearing, to turn it into a matter of scientific management? Today's genomics, argues Hall, poses the same old ethical questions that Christians must always ask one another: Who is my neighbor? Am I my brother's and sister's keeper? She suggests that dealing with today's developments requires not inventing a new ethics but using the ethics we already have (and often fail to use).

Rather than embracing the “radical giftedness of all life,” Hall insists, Protestants have devoted themselves to efforts that justify “meticulously planned procreation.” By accepting the presuppositions of scarcity that are the beginning point of a market economy, “mainline middle-class Protestantism sold out in at least two ways. First, by downplaying the gratuity of grace, middle-class Protestants endorsed a particular configuration of domesticity as a means to do no less than ‘save the world.’” Second, the “relatively self-sufficient, middle-class, white, Protestant nuclear family of two parents and two or perhaps three aptly gender-balanced children came to be the model by which all other configurations, colors, and classes of domesticity were viewed as, at best, unusual.”

Inevitably, this invited the distinction between wanted and unwanted babies—not only as to the timing of pregnancies and achievement of control over reproduction but also in distinguishing normal children from abnormal, separating out the sleek convertibles from the clunkers. Using mountains of materials put out by the Methodists, Hall displays the way in which birth control became a kind of religious obligation. This, of course, was entirely in tune with the birth control movement's insistence that women who did not control the births of their children were little more than brood animals. Tethered to tight control over births was a fear of uncontrolled reproduction in "teeming Asia"—Margaret Sanger's language—and the idea that the advanced white Protestant culture of North America was obligated to do what it could to address out-of-control births in other areas.

Somehow all of this came with a patina of religious justification. Christine Rosen's *Preaching Eugenics* first drew our attention to the full absorption of the eugenics message into Protestant sermons, invocations and even honors and awards. Hall makes good use of Rosen's pioneering work, adding to it copious material drawn from women's magazines and popular advertisements. What version of Christianity could sustain and support this heavy load of cleanliness, scientific maternalism, birth control, the raising of perfect babies and all the rest? "Normalized Methodism," Hall calls it: the insistence that Methodists "turn their evaluative eyes on one another, looking for splinters and stray hairs and prodigal children and lack of faith." Being one's sibling's keeper came to mean insisting on one's sibling's normalization.

Because Margaret Sanger had "convinced most Methodists" that there were too many people in the world, they came to believe that they were responsible for limiting the size of their own families and for treating population growth among black and brown people as a time bomb "more dangerous than the H-bomb"—again in Sanger's words. Added to the problem of "too many people" was the problem of the wrong kind of people. Today Methodists as a whole seem to have no problem with the vast array of prenatal testing aimed at weeding out the imperfect, and they acquiesce in the nearly 90 percent abortion rate in cases of Down syndrome.

Told that the idea of progress is "congenial to the Methodist mind," Methodists were increasingly deprived of a critical vocabulary with which to discuss rapidly moving developments in reproductive technology and many other fields. They simply assumed "the superiority of Anglo-Protestantism as the culmination of moral 'social-evolutionary development.'"

Hall has written an important book, one that should take its place on any list of texts to consult on motherhood, families, religion and American culture. But there are two possible lines of criticism that one might take up. Although she recognizes that there is a disparity between advice and practice when it comes to parenting, Hall makes little attempt to figure out how best to bridge that gap—to examine actual practices to determine whether they conformed to the urgings in popular magazines. Second, Hall tends to overinterpret advertising jingles and magazine iconography. It isn't clear to me that these warrant the degree of scrutiny she gives them from time to time. This leads to a question I hope Hall will explore in her future work: Given the richness, density and saturated meaning of Christianity's symbols, its iconography, why couldn't or didn't Christians put up more critical resistance or even display vigorous skepticism in light of the developments Hall rightly criticizes?

I have a hunch that in answer to this question, Hall would note that the pop-cultural Zeitgeist seems to trump other sources of meaning, especially if those other sources have allied themselves with the dominant themes and thrusts of the culture. But this deserves more thought. In an era in which one of the greatest dangers we face is genetic fundamentalism, we need all the critical minds we can get to challenge fantasies of engineered perfection. Attempts to square those fantasies with the Christian gospel are not only forlorn but nearly obscene. This is a sensibility I believe Hall shares, and I hope she digs down into her tradition of Methodism in order to find the sources of critical renewal that might yet linger there.